DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 086 EA 009 220

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TITLE Direct Experience As a Factor in the Development of Public School Superintendents' Attitudes Toward the Private School Movement.
PUB DATE Nov 76
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Sociological Association (Monroe, Louisiana, November, 1976); For related documents see EA 009 219 and ED 122 402

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Educational Needs; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Facility Requirements; *Private Schools; Public Schools; Questionnaires; Racial Discrimination; *Racial Segregation; *School Segregation; *School Superintendents; Social Problems; Tuition
IDENTIFIERS *Alabama

ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between attitudes of public school superintendents and the amount of direct experience they have had dealing with the development of private academies in their respective school districts. The dependent variables consist of eight attitudinal items. The first four deal with potential reasons for the return of students to public schools, and the last four deal with impacts of private schools. Data for this study were collected from questionnaires mailed to all public superintendents in Alabama. A final return rate of over 70 percent was achieved. (Author/MLF)

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ED135086

DIRECT EXPERIENCE AS A FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE PRIVATE SCHOOL MOVEMENT

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Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Sociological Association

Monroe, Louisiana

November, 1976

EA 009 220

INTRODUCTION

The Brown decision (Brown vs. Board of Education, 1954) signalled the end of "separate but equal" policies in American education, but in the South, fostered the birth of another movement which would strive to reestablish the dual school system. The well established private school system had a newcomer, the segregation academy.

Although initiated at the time of Brown, and strengthened by the adoption of statewide plans for private schools by several southern states (Palmer, 1974); the segregation academy movement would not receive strong impetus for nearly ten years. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and further court ordered desegregation during 1969 and 1970, parents in great numbers, dissatisfied with the move toward educational integration, withdrew their children from public schools and formed private white academies (Walden and Cleveland, 1971; Champagne, 1973). By 1970, growth had slowed but no significant trend of return to public schools could be verified.

Although literature dealing with the subject of segregation academies has dealt largely with inventorying their overnight establishment, studies such as the following have attempted to explain their growth. Concerning the development of private schools in Mississippi, Palmer (1971), relating growth to socioeconomic status (SES), found a positive correlation existing between racial SES discrepancy and white abandonment of public schools. Also concerning the Mississippi situation, Lowry (1973) depicted the segregation academy as a stage of educational change, suggesting that residential integration may be the ultimate solution. Wiles (1972), in a study of Florida's academies, questions the validity of classifying all academies as racist. It is his contention that although racism may be the driving force,

in certain cases private schools may offer the only source of disruption-free education. In a statistical analysis of white flight, Clotfelter (1976) points out both income and percent non-white of the student population as being important.

As in Mississippi, Florida, and other southern states, Alabama has experienced rapid private academy development. Champagne (1973:59) reports that the number of private schools in Alabama jumped from 83 in 1969 to 146 in 1970. Applying quantitative measures to certain aspects of private schools in Alabama, Cleveland (1971) found that a wide range of quality exists.

While many of these studies go beyond enumeration and classification of schools, they do not deal with the sociological impacts of the private school movement. According to Palmer (1974:3), reporting findings of a comprehensive study of private education in the South prepared for the National Institute of Education, "No studies were located that dealt with the sociological implications of the private school movement either for the nation or for the South."

One measure of the sociological impact which has been little used to date is an attitudinal measure of public school officials. In the case of private school development, the public school officials, particularly the superintendent, must deal directly with the associated impacts. The effect of the private school movement is locally important to her/him. Therefore, through activity with and knowledge of local private schools, certain attitudes are developed. Studies dealing with the attitudes of public school superintendents in Alabama toward the academies (Mader and Mader, 1975, 1976) found that characteristics such as the type and grade level of private academies, the social class of students enrolled, and rural or urban location

of private academies are associated with the development of public school officials' attitudes.

Such studies are important in their contribution to the understanding of attitudinal development of superintendents who have experienced the private school phenomenon directly. However, the findings of such studies can not be generalized to apply to those not directly experienced. Do their attitudes differ? It is to this question that this paper is addressed. Considered will be the relationship between attitudes of public school superintendents and the amount of direct experience they have had dealing with the development of private academies in their respective school districts. Explored will be the subject of whether significant differences exist between the attitudes of superintendents who have and who have not directly experienced private school development.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study were collected utilizing the mailed questionnaire technique. The sample consists of all public school superintendents in the state of Alabama. Initial collection of data was completed during August, 1975, and a return rate of over 60 percent was achieved. A second mailing to obtain further information was carried out during February, 1976, and a final return rate of over 70 percent was achieved. The instrument consisted of an inventory sheet, to accumulate data concerning the extent and type of private school development from 1967 to 1975, and a series of eight attitudinal items designed to tap information concerning the demise and social impact of private schools. These attitudinal items were derived from a review of relevant literature and from personal interviews with public school officials completed during June, 1975.

The dependent variables consist of the eight attitudinal items. The

first four deal with potential reasons for the return of students to public schools, and the last four deal with impacts of private schools. All of the dependent variables were originally in a Likert-like response format (FA A U D FD). These have been collapsed into agree, undecided, and disagree (FA + A=A, U=U, D + FD=D). The following is the list of dependent variables.

Superintendents' attitudes toward the following as reasons for the return of students to public schools:

1) increased faith in public schools

2) poor facilities offered by private schools

3) poor quality education obtained in private schools

4) increasing tuition

Superintendents' attitudes toward the following as impacts of private schools:

1) took an overload of students from public schools

2) provided an outlet for racial tension

3) make public school officials more aware of educational needs

4) create community-based social tension

The independent variable, direct experience, is presented as a dichotomy (Yes/No) and represents whether or not private school development has occurred within each superintendent's respective district during the period, 1967-1975.

Crosstabulation of superintendents' attitudes by their level of direct experience has been completed in order to measure the association of direct experience to each attitudinal item. Analysis utilizes Gamma as a measure of association and Chi-square as a measure of table significance. Individual row percent differences have been computed for each table and the Lawshe-Baker Nomograph (Downie and Heath, 1974:184-185) has been incorporated

to test for significance of percentage differences between the categories of direct experience within each level of the associated dependent variables.

FINDINGS

Table 1 depicts the levels of association and significance for the independent variable, direct experience, and the four dependent variables concerning the return of students to public schools.

Table 1. Association Levels Between Direct Experience and Attitudes Concerning the Return of Students to Public Schools.

Students return due to:	Gamma*	Significance (x^2)
Increased faith in public schools	(-.34)**	n.s.
Poor facilities offered by private schools	(-.32)	$p < .05$
Poor quality education of private schools	-.19	n.s.
Increasing tuition costs	-.04	n.s.

* ( ) denote acceptable level of Gamma -- .30 or more
** zero cell in analysis

In the cases of both increased faith in public schools and poor facilities offered by private schools, the associations are moderately strong, (-.34) and (-.32) respectively. The observed relationship of increased faith to direct experience denotes that with or without direct experience superintendents are likely to agree that increased faith is a factor in the return of students. Concerning the poor facilities offered by private schools, the relationship is obtained due to the fact that superintendents with direct experience tended to disagree while those without direct experience tended to agree. Note that while both of the above levels of association are acceptable, only the findings concerning poor facilities were found to be significant. The relationship of direct experience to poor

education in private schools and to increasing tuition costs lack both strength of association and statistical significance.

Table 1a provides for closer scrutiny of the association between direct experience and attitudes toward the dependent variable, increased faith in public schools. Although both superintendents with and without

Table 1a. Students Return to Public Schools Due to Increased Faith in Public Schools: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D*
Agree	65%	77%	n.s.
Undecided	18	23	n.s.
Disagree	17	0	$p < .01$
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(40)	(17)	

* D refers to percentage difference
significance levels obtained utilizing the Lawshe-Baker Nomograph

direct experience tend to agree that increased faith is a factor, superintendents having experienced development were the lone representatives of the disagreee category; signifying some distaste with increased faith as an explanation of the return of students.

Table 1b. Students Return to Public Schools Due to Poor Facilities Offered by Private Schools: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D
Agree	34%	39%	n.s.
Undecided	24	50	$p < .05$
Disagree	42	11	$p < .05$
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(38)	(18)	

As can be observed in Table 1b, no significant differences were found between the percentages of superintendents agreeing that poor facilities of

private schools is a factor. There were, however, significant differences encountered within the undecided and disagree categories. Familiarity with the private school movement, in this case, ia associated with a feeling that private school facilities are not necessarily a factor of return. A significantly greater percentage of superintendents without direct experience were unsure of the condition of private school facilities.

Table 1c, which considers superintendents' attitudes toward the possibility that students return to public schools due to the poor quality of education received in private schools, contains no significant differences. It is interesting to note that neither group gives an overwhelming negative response to this factor, in spite of the fact that much criticism of private school curriculum has been voiced. In fact, one finds that both groups are rather unsure about the quality of education offered by private academies.

Table 1c. Students Return to Public Schools Due to Poor Education in Private Schools: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D
Agree	33%	33%	n.s.
Undecided	44	61	n.s.
Disagree	23	6	n.s.
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(39)	(18)	

No significant differences were found when considering superintendents' attitudes with the dependent variable, increasing tuition (Table 1d). This being the most widely publicized problem of private education, the great percentage of agreement should not be of surprise.

Table 2 depicts the levels of association and significance for the independent variable, direct experience, and the four dependent variables concerning impacts of private academies.

Table 1d. Students Return to Public Schools Due to Increasing Tuition of Private Schools: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D
Agree	73%	72%	n.s.
Undecided	24	22	n.s.
Disagree	3	6	n.s.
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(37)	(18)	

Encountered in Table 2 is a rather strong association (-.50) between direct experience and the suggestion that private schools took an overload of students from public schools. Although both groups disagree, it is the large proportion of those with experience who disagree which accounts for the strong negative association. A strong association was also found

Table 2. Association Levels Between Direct Experience and Attitudes Concerning Impacts of Private Schools.

Private Schools:	Gamma*	Significance (x^2)
Took an overload from public schools	(-.50)	$p < .01$**
Provided an outlet for racial tension	.24	n.s.
Make public officials aware of needs	(-.47)	$p < .05$
Create community-based social tension	(.34)	$p < .01$

* ( ) denote acceptable level of Gamma -- .30 or more
** in one-third of the cells, expected frequencies were less than 5

between direct experience and the suggestion that private schools make public school officials more aware of educational needs (-.47). Although those without experience do slightly agree, once again, the rather large proportion of superintendents with experience who disagree is responsible for the negative association.

A moderate association level was obtained between direct experience and the contention that private schools create community-based social tension (.34). Superintendents with direct experience were more likely to agree that tension is created than those who have had no experience. Concerning the possibility that private schools provide an outlet for racial tension, both the association and significance levels fall below acceptable standards.

Table 2a, concerning attitudes toward the impact stating that private schools actually took an overload of students from public schools, reveals significant differences in the undecided and disagree response categories.

Table 2a. Private Schools Took an Overload of Students from Public Schools: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D*
Agree	16%	17%	n.s.
Undecided	4	39	$p < .01$
Disagree	80	44	$p < .01$
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(45)	(18)	

* D refers to the percentage difference significance levels obtained utilizing the Lawshe-Baker Nomograph

Those superintendents having not experienced private schools directly were more undecided on this issue, however a significnatly greater percentage of superintendents with experience feel that no overload was taken.

Another widely publicized aspect of the private academy movement is depicted in Table 2b. Although significant differences were not discovered, the direction of the results in this table indicates that public school officials, regardless of direct experience, feel that racial tension is relieved by the movement of certain students to private academies.

Table 2b. Private Schools Provide an Outlet for Racial Tension: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D
Agree	74%	59%	n.s.
Undecided	4	18	n.s.
Disagree	22	23	n.s.
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(46)	(17)	

When responding to the proposed impact that private schools make public school officials more aware of educational needs (Table 2c), a significant difference was obtained between the percentages who disagree. A strong negative stand is taken by those having experienced development while those without experience were slightly more likely to feel that awareness is created. Noteworthy, though not significant, is the percentage difference between those who agree.

Table 2c. Private Schools Make Public School Officials More Aware of Educational Needs: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D
Agree	24%	42%	n.s.
Undecided	7	21	n.s.
Disagree	69	37	$p < .05$
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(45)	(19)	

Table 2d explores attitudes toward the suggestion that private schools create community-based social tension. Experience appears to be a factor in this case since significant differences are encountered in both the agree and undecided categories but not in the disagree category. Superintendents having experienced development are much more likely to agree that

Table 2d. Private Schools Create Community-Based Social Tension: Superintendents' Attitudes by Direct Experience.

	Direct Experience		
	Yes	No	Significance of D
Agree	63%	28%	p <.05
Undecided	11	50	p <.01
Disagree	26	22	n.s.
	100%	100%	
(N of cases)	(46)	(18)	

social tension is created. Lack of experience is evidenced by the significantly greater percentage of those without development taking a neutral position.

CONCLUSIONS

Association levels between direct experience and the dependent variables concerned with the return of students to public schools were acceptable in two instances, however statistical significance was achieved in only one. Increased faith in public schools (-.34) and poor facilities of private schools (-.32) show moderate levels of association with direct experience, the latter being significant. Neither of the dependent variables, poor education received in private schools (-.19) nor increasing tuition costs (-.04), achieved acceptable levels of association or significance.

Analysis of percentage differences revealed that both groups of superintendents agree that increased faith is a factor in the return of students. This may not be surprising in view of the amount of criticism levelled at public schools during the period in question. Officials may be anxious to have some sign tnat the public's faith in its school system has increased. Concerning poor facilities, superintendents with direct

experience were more likely to disagree that this is a factor (42% vs 11%) while those without experience were more likely to choose a neutral position (24% vs 50%). The greatest percentage of superintendents in both categories were undecided concerning whether or not poor quality education is stimulus to return. High tuition as a factor in the return of students is highly agreeable to both groups.

Association levels between direct experience and the dependent variables concerned with impacts of private school development were acceptable and crosstabulation results significant in three instances. Association between direct experience and the variables private schools took an overload of students (-.50), private schools make public school officials more aware of educational needs (-.47), and private schools create community-based social tension (.34) meet the acceptance criteria. The association between direct experience and the premise that private schools provide an outlet for racial tension (.24) falls below the acceptable standard and does not achieve statistical significance.

Analysis of percentage differences concerning the proposal that private schools took an overload found significant differences in the percentage of disagree and undecided responses given by each group of superintendents. Those who have experienced development were more likely to disagree (80% vs 44%) while those without development were more likely to be undecided (4% vs 39%). Both groups tend to agree that private schools provide an outlet for racial tension; further, there are no significant differences in either of the remaining categories. A significantly greater percentage of superintendents with direct experience disagree that private schools make public school officials more aware of educational needs (69% vs 37%). Superintendents who have experienced development were found to more readily

agree that community-based social tension is created (63% vs 28%) while those without experience were more likely to be undecided (11% vs 50%).

As a factor in the development of superintendents' attitudes toward the private academy movement, direct experience was found to be most important in the differentiation of undecided and disagree responses. In only one instance was a significant percentage difference encountered in an agree response category. From this, one might believe that superintendents who have not experienced private school development actually lack the knowledge or familiarity to form an opinion of the situation. While this is not evidence to either accept or reject the attitudes which may be partially derived from actual direct experience, it is evidence that widespread negative stereotyping is not necessarily occurring. By entering a noncommital response, many superintendents are expressing, at least outwardly, that the development of private academies is not preconceived as being detrimental.

To this point, relatively little research has contributed to our understanding of the socioeconomic impact of private schools or their longevity. It is suggested that future research focus upon these issues in attempting to explore differences between private and public education, predict future roles of private and public education, and anticipate the impact of solutions to controversial educational problems.

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